



# ◆ ONTOLOGICA

WINTER

2013

5.2

# ONTOLOGICA

A Journal of Art and Thought

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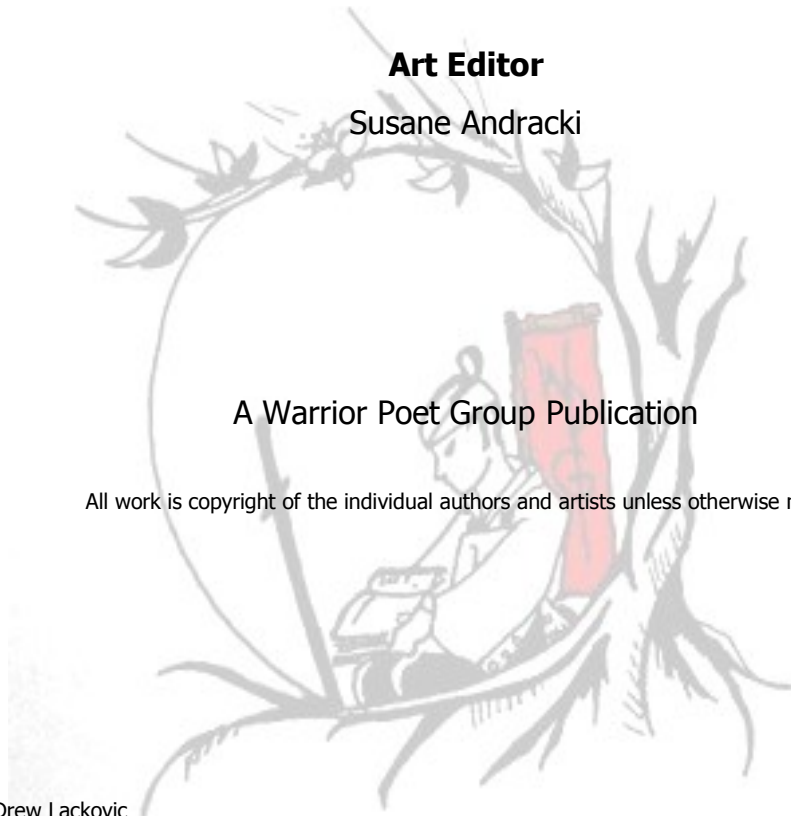
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A Warrior Poet Group Publication

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Issue 5.2 Winter 2013

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## Letter from the Editors

Welcome to the Winter 2013 issue of *Ontologica*. This issue is dedicated as a non-fiction only issue, largely because the non-fiction submissions for the last couple of submission cycles have been greatly outpacing both in quality and quantity what we're receiving for fiction and art. As such we're contemplating a bit of a format change in upcoming fiction submissions. We're also considering rolling back to an annual release schedule if submissions remain on their current trend. If you have any comments or suggestions on what you might like to see in future issues, please let us know.

Best wishes and a happy 2014 to you,

The Editors of Ontologica

Zac Walsh

## How to Be Reasonable by Lamp Light

*The death everywhere is no trouble  
once you see it as nature, landscape, or botany.*

Jack Gilbert, "They Call it Attempted Suicide"

One of the few highlights of the summer was meeting Diogenes, a friend I met as I have met most of the people I have spent most of my life with. In a book. This book I happened to be reading while under a large redwood, beer in tow, grill on fire while camping with my girlfriend. And it was good, good until the platoon of shirtless, malnourished, mullet helmeted adult rubes in training arrived on the scene warring through our camp, super soaking the shit out of my philosophical musings. If Diogenes was alive, and got his hands on one of those super soakers, I dreamed, those kids would never forget site 57A. The horrors would stalk them to their wedding aisles, job interviews, dingy motel liaisons and last hospital stay.

Diogenes was a philosopher, of sorts. More practically, he was a naked mustachioed lunatic who lived in a bath tub and masturbated in and on the public. He died sometime around 323 BC, legend has it, and as he lived, he strove to exemplify what he considered the ultimate end of philosophy, unfettered existential freedom, in order to "follow the example of the choruses: for they set the note a little high, to ensure that the rest might hit the right note." But for all his eccentricities, he is most known for his lamp.

In the middle of the day, Diogenes would walk about the streets carrying a lit lamp, stating again and again, "I am looking for a man," which bothered most of the people he came in contact with, they feeling quite sure they were qualified applicants. But for Diogenes, and many of those who chose to shine their brand of light on such searches, simply breathing and working and earning and propagating and expiring does not earn one the title of a Man. It takes unknowably more. It is for this cynicism

that he was ironically known as the Dog in his time, *kuon* in Greek, and the English word for cynic. But perhaps, I wondered as I observed the three giant and seemingly metastasizing hillbilly hoards, possibly families, that were so willing to forget that my girlfriend and I did in fact have a campsite mercilessly wedged between their two hot air blowing vortexed entanglements of the human capacity for consumption—maybe Diogenes and even his reincarnation in Nietzsche were not the dark cynics or all-out Nihilists they are often praised or derided for so being. Perhaps, their oddity and potential ideological malice and madness were born from a love of what it *might mean* to be a conscious being – a Man in the world, the ever becoming doomed beauty.

It could be, my eighth Pabst and I considered, that thinkers like these, those who stare into the abyss of their time and place, those who see the de-humanizing forces that many have been subjected to, and now, in my world, willingly crave, these thinkers do not renounce the world of their peers out of spite, or hate, but out of a depth of sorrow that can only be carved out of life from a belief in the full possibility of man—a being unlike any other—a conscious subjective agent who can revolt against the objectifying desires of what is packaged as civilized, but does not. Diogenes, when taken prisoner aboard a pirate ship, noticed how the pigs and the sheep that were to be sold were fed well so as to fatten them up and increase the profit, while the human slaves set for the same economical aim were starved into skeletons, their value plummeting. It was a state of things he deemed *absurd*, much more so than living in a clay tub, or shamelessly using your soaker in public. One now must do some hard work not to think of the nets hung around electronic factories in Asia, factories named after our first forbidden leap into consciousness, absurdity, shame, and love. Pigs and sheep and devices, but what about the people?

So I, as I steeped the coals of my loathing for what I, guy who reads philosophy while camping, deemed as completely useless beings—uneducated, loud, rude, smelly, overpopulating, no doubt polluting, non-recycling, giant wheeled truck driving, exhaust pipe enhancing, Kenny Chesney appreciating, Fox and Friends believing absolutely worthless and purposeless mouth breathers—I had to ask myself: what is my use?

What makes my actions important or worth it? What the hell is It, already? Where are we going and when will at least someone get there and tell us the way?

And as I have done so often you think I would knock it off by now, I went back to philosophy, truly seeking an answer, not knowing why or even willing to ask why I thought I was owed such a thing, or who I expected to blame if I never got what I thought I deserved, and as always, philosophy provided me with more pain than profit, more questions than answers, more dark nights than orange dawns. I felt absurd, yet necessarily so.

Perhaps useless was a place to begin, I desperately needed to believe. Perhaps absurdity was not the nihilistic wrecking ball I had feared it to be, but rather some sort of perpetually crumbling cornerstone. Was this what the man Diogenes never found was trying to tell me—you must go down before you go up—you must die before you can live—you, the absurd man, must be last to know, and first to know it? I still am not sure—do not know—but I have come out the other end of this summer a new subject, a bit more free, and surprisingly looking at life as straight in the eye as I knew how, not annihilated. Weary, but still awaiting.

In the *Republic* Plato seemed to get my current situation about right when he writes, “Of all those who start out on philosophy—not those who take it up for the sake of getting educated when they are young and then drop it, but those who linger in it for a long time—most become quite queer, not to say completely vicious; while the ones who seem perfectly decent... become useless.” Which is, of course, no great consolation for me, slightly hungover camper, to read amidst the wails of 70 some-odd chawbacons rousting from a cold night of Little Debbie dreams. They all woke up with such purpose, such drive, and such certainty in what they wanted—bike rides, water balloons, pancake wrapped sausages with Big Gulp cups of syrup, the vivifying anger of sports talk and the bitching of work and bosses and Old Lady’s.

What did I have? Ten years behind me of the study of the “love of wisdom,” a few degrees that allowed me some part time teaching duties, stacks of typed ideas no one would ever read, and no more reserves of faith to believe I was any less absurd

than these folk, any folk. At least they could laugh off their headaches while cheering “Hair of the Dog, Motherfuckers!” and yelling at their kids to stop yelling. Never haunted by irony, ceaselessly progressing, all the while my life feeling more and more like a consistent undertaking of delusion that someday the rock will not roll back downhill. And I, ever slow to learn any lessons, turned to Camus. If he failed to teach me why it was alright, and maybe even *meaningful*, to recognize and accept our individual roles as Sisyphus, then all was really rot and bilge, a complete fuck-up, a godless void of blind contempt and useless striving – or if not All, at least me and my life, which, if we are to be honest about things, really amount to one and the same.

Why Sisyphus was sentenced to roll his rock up the hill for the rest of eternity in the Underworld is up for some debate, useless as it may be, but that he did do this, that he *had to* do it, this is confirmed with the watermark of myth. When I was first told of Sisyphus in an English class at my incredibly Christian High School, I was taught to understand the story as one that encouraged us to be thankful, to recognize how blessed we were to have a purpose in our life because we were created by God, shaped to do work towards His good pleasure. But now, twelve years later, I needed to go back to the myth with a new lens, and the author of *The Plague* and *The Stranger* and *The Exile* seemed to be my only hope, the wise man from Algiers who helped me through my first loss of God in the dark hall corner of Rhor Philosophy and Religion as an undergraduate.

Sisyphus is what Camus calls the “absurd hero” because his situation or *condition* is made up of a tragic blend of passion and torture. “His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted towards accomplishing nothing. This is the price one must pay for the passions of the earth.” This was a start, or a place of departure for me. Sisyphus was supposed to teach the high school me that he was going nowhere, while I, special and chosen, was going somewhere—and that made all the difference. But now Camus’ tone about this man’s toil in the unlit Underworld seemed more illuminating. The passions of this earth, to care about being alive, to fight back against the bad faith of



always resting upon the Jimmy Tomorrow Next Day, or Next Life, or Next President, or next tablet, or next raise, or next promotion, or next screw mentality that we are taught will get us home—to embrace this relentless acceptance of the absurdity of the rocks we must roll if we wish to *be* at all, this resounded with terrible potential in me.

Camus goes on to tell us that what makes Sisyphus both absurd and tragic is that he is conscious the whole time, he is keenly aware that his task is hopeless if the goal is to get the rock somewhere, or to finish with his labor. If the labor were to be finished, if the task is finite, then Sisyphus would no longer be a conscious being, he would be no-thing. It is only in his consciousness that his task is endless, as long as he is, that he becomes a hero and worthy of consideration.

The place Camus chooses to focus on the rock rolling is not the rock rolling itself, but the moment when the rock inevitably rolls back downhill and Sisyphus, worn down from his labor, watches the rock return to the beginning, and in that moment must find a reason to walk back after the rock and begin rolling again. That descent, Camus hopes, may seem one of great sorrow, but it can also be one of great joy. Even though the work is hard, and never seems to pay as much as it costs, there is still some rolling to do, and Sisyphus is not wholly exhausted, which is to say, Sisyphus still *is*, and is able to know it. This awareness of weariness and refusal of exhaustion “drives out of this world a god who had come into it with dissatisfaction and a preference for futile sufferings. It makes fate a human matter, which must be settled among men. All Sisyphus’ silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols.” And there it was, my constant summer discomfort pounded out in black and white for all to see. I did not want to admit that my own rock rolling was not something greater, something wholly more, than all those I considered fools scurrying about me day to day, soaking each other in myriad ways. If I wanted to be truly absurd, and thus on the path to hopeful rock rolling, I could no longer worship myself, and even worse, I could no longer condemn others. As I sat at my desk, now many days away from camp, still imagining tripping one of those Sour Patch Kid crazed brats into the firepit, had to wonder, where is the fun in that?

Yet it was not fun that I wanted, but answers, meaning, or in the absence of all those potentials, at least an explanation. But from who? Those in charge, I thought. The ones who are responsible for... god, for what? As hard as I worked toward clear lines of existential battle, I could not help but feel like a grad-school anarchist in first year Political Science, or a poor person screaming to the ceiling at The Economy, a stack of credit card bills at their feet. It was that word, response-able, that was getting me. You *are*, Camus was saying. Not for what is, but for what you are. All that matters to Camus is our response to the camp we find ourselves in, and that, though he is quick to call it freedom, is more terrifying than I, and I imagine we, want to believe. If there is no apology coming from a tank-topped parent, if the children will never put down their guns, if the King will not open his gates, then what are we to do? It would appear we are victims of fate, completely justified to bitch away our days, or in using others, or in worshipping things. Nothing is sacred, and there is no way one can be reasonable in their revolt.

Only if Camus had stopped there. "The human heart," he continues, "has a tiresome tendency to label as fate only what crushes it. But happiness likewise, in its way, is without reason, since it is inevitable. Modern man, however, takes credit for himself, when he doesn't fail to recognize it." And there it was, and is, and will be. It was soothing to de-humanize the other campers who bothered me because I felt like a victim, and there is an eroding pride hidden beneath such shameful thought. I, in every dendrite jump producing thought against my neighbor, was claiming that I made sense and they did not, but the absurd man is not allowed such luxury.

Camus had done some work on me, in me, but I was not ready to begin rolling again. I still felt owed more, and I still hated the fools around me. More wisdom. I am looking for a man. Camus' own rolling ended abruptly in a car accident before he could finish his true treatise on revolt, while working on a book titled *The First Man*. Seems he was still on the Diogenian hunt, and it was in the work of Franz Kafka he saw hope.

"They were offered the choice between becoming kings or the couriers of kings. The way children would, they all wanted to be couriers. Therefore there are only

couriers who hurry about the world, shouting to each other – since there are no kings – messages that have become meaningless. They would like to put an end to this miserable life of theirs but they dare not because of their oaths of service.” This is a quintessential Kafka parable, and one that has haunted me all summer, and if I am fortunate, all my waking life. I do hope it leaves me be while I sleep, sleep being difficult enough with the most important election in history coming up, the Economy hanging perilously from the imaginary thread penned by the ghosts of golden gods, and retirement to plan for, ceaselessly, motivated by that all important question—how do you know you will have enough money in order to reach the correct time of your death? What if you die too late? Follow the green arrow, and carry your orange number like a hollow cross.

Kafka is often praised for being a prophet, and that is sadly appropriate, not because he could see into the future, or predict outcomes of his present day outrages, but because he was so goddamn honest with himself, and thankfully, with us. But we would never have his best parables if he had his way, his way being to burn his work when he was dead. We may assume part of this wish comes from that inescapable melancholy of an artist that fears he will never be read or appreciated. Kafka, however, feared that he would.

A friend once admitted to Kafka that his work felt like a voice from the future, and Kafka responded, “I know, I have to admit it. That is why my work must be destroyed, because I have no answer to offer.” Kafka took the absurd man as seriously as any artist of his time, or any time, mourned with Zarathustra of humanity’s pitiful responsibility, and laughed at the ways in which we are distracted from the one truth that might calm this raucous, object craving, power playing, mendaciously draining existence we find ourselves in every generation—none of us Get It. *It* is dead, and we are not to blame for killing It, but for perpetuating It. Nor is It to blame, as It never was. We can only be blamed for pretending any longer, and for stepping over others to become the true definition of a no-One. In Kafka we are challenged to look at the world with absurd eyes, and if we can manage not to “put an end to it,” we may begin.

In reading and re-reading the above parable my first inclination was to laugh at all our power players of my day—politicians and political pundits, television and radio hosts, Twitters and Tweepers and followers and Likers, campaign slogans and product grab lines and market researchers and food scientists and beta testing and all the other forms of loudness that shake you by the neck and say, “the world is passing you by. You are so forty-two seconds ago. Renew. Re-buy. Re-up. Re-plenish. Re-boot. Re-fi.” My whole world, me excluded of course, seemed like a self-renewing busyness of meaningless messages. Waves and Radiation. But that is a misreading of the parable, because the more I read Kafka, with Camus behind me and Diogenes ahead, the more the first phrase became the rock, the thing. *They were offered a choice between becoming.* It is absurd, the world we live in, the worlds that have been lived in, and the worlds that are to come, and this is so because man, unlike any other thing, is a no-thing, a subjective mover, and thus offered a choice between becoming. We do not get a choice to become, we simply one moment are, and we do not get a choice to never not be, as one day we will not. But between becoming we do, we can, we are. And this, after months of mental roundabouts, was not merely the semantics of Academia, or even a justification of depression or abuse, but rather a call to arms. No more shouting. No more oaths. No more ends or means. Nothing is to be explained, or in Kafka’s own notebook way of saying, “the myth tries to explain the unexplainable. As it comes from a ground of truth, it must again end in the unexplainable.” Man is not a thing to be explained, or blamed, or apologized for, and man is certainly not a thing to be ruled. Man is a nothing, and thus sacred and wholly other. And with this I needed one more man, a man who preceded the death of God, the man Nietzsche called his personal demon, the man who claimed, “life is a business that does not cover its costs.” Who is to say where hope may be found.

I woke up this morning to the sounds of Elmo singing a song in the hopes of becoming a butterfly, and because my arms were underneath my body and unaware that the rest of me needed them to wake up immediately, I listened. When I was finally able to change the channel and open my eyes, Elmo had instead become Ann Romney.

My first thought was, “which voice makes me want to lie underneath the rock more?” but then I shut up and began to listen for the message. Ms. Romney was being interviewed by one of those morning “news” casters on the kind of show that attempts to keep you up to date on world affairs—fires and bombs and plummeting grid-backed lines—while also making sure you know the weather for the next seven days, how to properly cook a quiche, and providing you with the top ten ways you can stretch your make-up budget. But her presence on the show reminded me it was Election Season.

“Tell us, Ms. Romney,” the man asked, looking intently at her, pen in hand, one leg crossed halfway over his other, picture laden fireplace mantel looming in the backdrop, “why have you decided to tell us, the American people, (exclusively! on our program!) of your no doubt painful miscarriage now? Why share this personal suffering?”

“Well,” she said, steadying herself, not all the way sure she wants to say what she was told to say, “I feel it is important that the American people see my husband as a human being, to know that he suffers just like the rest of the electorate.”

Never have I been more thankful for the choice of a puppet.

I quickly, before I broke the TV I could not afford to replace, turned the channel back to Elmo, just in time to hear him answer the all-important question, “Elmo, why do you want to become a butterfly?”

“That’s simple! Without me becoming a butterfly, this butterfly will have no one to talk to, no one to understand what he is trying to say.” Finally, the moment had arrived.

It was time to admit I lived in a world where only a literal puppet could achieve such a compassionate and uselessly beautiful epiphany.

But Elmo was not where I was trying to get to. It was Schopenhauer, the philosopher who holds the ominous rank as the Pessimists of pessimists, the inspirer of Nietzsche, and thus, literally, the grandfather of God’s demise. I have been reading and considering Nietzsche’s ideas for a decade now, sometimes in contrite and caustic moods of prayer, and others in those more comfortable clothes of sackcloth. And,

sometimes, just to feel real smart. But it took me until this summer to dare Schopenhauer, this after reading Kant's call that any thinker worth his salt must *Dare to Know*, and pondering Jasper's idea that our reason must be shipwrecked before we can hear wisdom. So it did not matter if I understood Schopenhauer, or not, but even so, I was scared. I feared this man who troubled the thinker that troubled me so, but, at the absurd point I was at, all my training and writing and jabbering into the night had been distilled to the place I needed to be – that of Fuck it. What is there to lose?

What I found was unexpected. Schopenhauer is, after much peeling, a sweetheart, and even after all these centuries of labels, he can still be read and understood to mean one basic thing—life will make you a beast if you allow yourself to think it or you matter, or to live by the bad faith that your suffering can be kept at bay, or masked, or denied, or paid off.

But the buck does not stop there, even though many have read Schopenhauer and his predecessors as if it must. Because for Schopenhauer, the model absurd man, it is human suffering in all its unique consciousness, that art speaks from and to. It is art, then, that allows us mopes and grunts and dredgers to indirectly engage with this spasmodic array of suffering the world insists upon, but avoid being destroyed by the direct agony of the sufferer. It is in art that we can achieve the compassion of resignation, in complete opposition against the resignation of judgment—in art where blame is replaced with sympathy, where secrets are replaced with confession, and where feigned certainty is baptized by sincere doubt. Life does not cover its costs, and it is arrogant to believe that we are deserved such a balance sheet. Life is not itemized, and not nearly as tangible as we want, or perhaps must, believe as we move through the matter of our day. And that is what Diogenes was looking for—a man to admit what appears through our literal eyes to be the worst of all possible worlds, while offering that momentary sparkle that can only come from the wink of irony, the wink that says, “but even so, if your arm gets tired, I can carry the lamp, at least for some time.”

One last man. I am currently preparing to teach Eugene O'Neill's tragic play *Long Day's Journey Into Night* to a class of college Sophomores. They have been a brave

group so far, having allowed me the rope to go through Socrates to Nietzsche on the first day, they expecting only a read through of the syllabus, and this not being a course in philosophy, but rather "Introduction to Literature." The first time I read this play I was in graduate school, and dealing with the reality that my mother was a morphine addict, I an alcoholic, and my Father a man who thought God would fix us both. I had no idea what I was in for, a play that is quite literally about my life, all the way down to the moistest Irish Catholic roots. But upon re-reading the play in order to get some ideas together for "my kids" I was struck by what I had missed, as if my summer's angst had split my head apart on the page, my bruised brain being mixed with the genius playwright who wrote this dedication to his wife, "Dearest: I give you the original script of this play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood. A sadly inappropriate gift, it would seem, for a day celebrating happiness. But you will understand. I mean it as a tribute to your love and tenderness which gave me the faith in love that enabled me to face my dead at last and write this play—write it with deep pity and understanding and forgiveness for ALL the four haunted Tyrones."

Sometimes truth is, to be sure.

The play opens with a description of bookshelves, and Schopenhauer and Nietzsche and some of the other absurd men are highlighted, as O'Neill was a writer haunted by these questions, a man who hated the nihilism that called so strongly for him, towards the wrong rock he knew through reason, a reason that could not quiet or convince his heart. But because of his suffering, he was able to render the lives of these four sufferers with such frustrating precision, as the entire time you experience their brutal conversations with one another, talk that is born of the great irony of love that makes us hate what we can never understand in full, and thus destroy—the frustration that causes you to think, and sometimes scream at your desk, at yourself: IF ONLY YOU WOULD, AND NOT DO...but that is where we all find ourselves, and why the play is such an instructive masterpiece. And it is the youngest son, Edmund, the artist, the poet, the boy who reads the "morbid" philosophers on the bookshelves that his Fundamentalist father loathes so, Edmund who is the only character capable of sustained empathy. Far from perfect, and near death at 23 from consumption, Edmund

wants to understand the pain of his family, which is something so far from their understanding, that they are incapable of hearing it. He wants to make his family into human beings, because he hopes in so doing he might become one as well. Through suffering, and the acceptance of it, Edmund is destroyed, but only because the other three Tyrones will not sign that song with him, or listen long enough to hear. So, there is much booze and morphine, and screams and lies and tears, a punch or two, and cruelty, but at the heart of the action is the absurdity that we are all capable of dealing with our living only when we admit we are not, when we admit we are alone, or feel as such—when we say the rock is too heavy, or too boring, or too meaningless, or too much just a goddamn rock already.

We do not admit this, because somewhere in us there is an innate yet animate sedition that lies, that hisses, that says if we admit this we shall surely die. It is the absurd man alone who can laugh at this threat, can perhaps even muster one from the belly, who can answer, “that is reasonable, I suppose, unseen and unknown hissy one, and now that we can agree on my demise, will you hold this for me, if only for a moment?”



William Pomeroy

## Critique the Critic!

It is indeed an amusing jest, as one of the seven sages has already pointed out, that in war games it is the connoisseurs of the art who do battle, and those who do not understand the art who judge it<sup>1</sup>...A reviewer is and ought to be, ought to stake his honor on being, a ministering spirit.<sup>2</sup>

—Kierkegaard

So what does Kierkegaard mean by a “ministering spirit?” As remains the case in every work of art, this is open to interpretation. And yet it remains just as “factual” to say that one man’s interpretation might prove correct, for interpretation—when one *believes* in it—leads not to relativism. No indeed. In seeking to champion even a notion like relativism, one often forgets that what he proclaims is nothing more or less than his opinion.

One can go no further than to interpret something, believe in that interpretation himself, and assert that belief as his opinion. But every man’s desire to proclaim something as true—and to speak of his own, “good opinion”—reveals that Truth<sup>3</sup> is waiting to be uncovered. Surely it would not be *true* for one to say that no such Truth exists, for what else could beckon one to make such an assertion?

I therefore clasp my pen to lay bare what is truth *for me*, and if one agrees, then part of it may indeed extend to others. If not, then one is free without question to pursue what might resonate as truth instead.

## II. Negative Treatment

This is the mindset for a “ministering spirit.” Every truth, in order to be considered True, must originate as one’s opinion. Once it stands the test of criticism—which comes not by one person but a *series* of individuals—yes, only then may one advance the notion of it being True.

Every person holds within himself the potential to create Truth. But if this accomplishment happens, that Truth will, at least partially, refer to and depend upon some pre-existent Truth<sup>4</sup>, and receive its validation from a succession of individuals, with whom it resonates. It will certainly not be True within the very moment one declares it, simply because a certain, “Truthful” person is concerned.

But art is a realm very strange indeed. People often think so highly of their own opinions that, in criticizing a specific piece of art, theirs is automatically the final say. And what is even less defensible? —People often *follow* these self-obsessed opinions without delay, because their masters exude a kind of abrasive “confidence” which, if for no other reason than its intimidating effect, is hard to oppose.

If anything, this should form the *strongest* reason to oppose such criticism. It can be permissible, even appropriate, to speak *objectively* in referencing something generally well-known (for objective thinking is itself a generality), or when some “proof” exists for an objective claim; but not in considering a specific *piece* of art.

When a single person critiques one single art work, that person’s argument fits the very definition of subjectivity. To criticize something in a “pseudo-objective” manner—as if that piece of art is either good or bad, depending on the opinion of a single person—is therefore to assume that someone can (somehow) make an argument which, at the outset, goes beyond what he can ever accomplish by himself.

Under *slightly* different circumstances, people never tolerate such behavior. Were one to exclaim during a banquet that *everyone* should stop eating because *his* food was too salty, people would hopefully find it offensive and disobey. But there is something in the art world which tends (if, for example, one issues an equivalent demand to those

viewing a set of gallery paintings) to *applaud* this conduct like some fallacious indication of one's ability.

If my reader happens to doubt whether or not this actually happens, I would ask that he explore the vast majority of art criticism. I will not trouble him with a list of examples, but name only a pair.

A.

Several years ago, I recall seeing a review for the film version of a play. The film itself, though highly popular, was denounced as lacking in comparison to the play. There was some admission that its director made a "valiant effort," but still it "came well short" of the play's greatness.

To this I would reply: Does that criticism not fail to add or take away anything from the film as such? Surely its director did not make a *film* actually meant to be a play, any more than the play's manager designed it as a film, originally. Do you have anything to say about the film itself?

B.

Several months ago, I recall seeing a "reader's response" within a highly respected magazine. It was meant to notify those involved, that he was cancelling his subscription because of "favoritism" for a certain writer.

To this I would reply: Who cares? If you dislike someone's work, turn the page or stop reading; but to advertise a personal decision, is completely un-necessary.

C.

I would argue against both of these examples, that their erroneous nature reveals only a selfish desire to be heard. What else could prompt someone to utter a useless argument—one in which there is really nothing to believe?

As presented above, that selfish desire to be heard requires a self-entitled *expectation* for people to listen. And why not? If it compels publishers to accept their work, can such individuals know better? Surely the best way to fight “the fluttering mist forms of vapor”<sup>5</sup> is to dismiss them.

### III. Positive Treatment

Having portrayed through negative discussion the *antithesis* of a “ministering spirit,” I now permit discussion of distinguishing qualities. As this concept has re-surfaced with some delay, perhaps its *essential* quality should not be delayed further.

The most vital characteristic for a “ministering spirit”—the strongest necessity possessing one—is that he conducts himself in a manner that remains instructive but never presumptuous. He must *assert* his opinion with a force that commands attention purely for its *significance*—as opposed to superficial approval for one’s “reputation” or, be it disapproving attention, for one’s arrogance.

It must be absolutely apparent that he *believes* in his opinion—and yet he presents it as nothing earth-shattering; with no delusions of grandeur; just what he believes. In doing so, he acknowledges that, if he is fortunate, supporters of his opinion will determine its actual Truth, regardless of and quite apart from any effort at defense.

If this is something he can manage, others will *find* themselves listening—not because he desperately projects himself upon them (which is always the case with arrogance), but out of a subconscious, natural desire for instruction. The critic—or “ministering spirit”—will stake his claim without an exigency to be heard, and so people will find relief in hearing it. They will *seek out* his opinion, free of painful acquiescence from demand. A “ministering spirit” then seizes the opportunity not to dictate but to instruct.

Clearly this must happen naturally. One cannot contrive the effect. But there are several practices for a “ministering spirit” that are valuable, nonetheless.

1. Do not personally attack the individual whose work is in question. This will result in nothing beneficial to either person. If it does occur, avoid denial that a personal insult has been dealt. This implies that someone cannot *recognize* when he is being attacked, which is even more insulting.

2. Bear in mind that a single criticism may have drastic consequences. This can at times be the exact reason to criticize something rather harshly; but during other times, the strongest motivation to be cautious.

3. In presenting criticism, always keep in mind the individual's *progression*. Let improvement of some kind remain the sole motivation for that criticism. (This is not only "good" criticism, but the only purpose for which criticism exists.) In doing so, never forget that the critic's understanding of a work is never as personal as that of him who first composed it; nor is it often as difficult or time-consuming.

One cannot contrive the effect. It is not just a *combination* of these practices—and others one might bring to light—which makes a "ministering spirit." There must be a "higher term" which "relates itself to the relation," and in turn "relates itself to itself."<sup>6</sup> There must be what Kierkegaard calls an "indefinable possession."<sup>7</sup>

This "indefinable possession" that *watches over* the practices of a "ministering spirit" and keeps them intact, is confidence. It is a confidence that does not waver or fluctuate, but is not immune to criticism, either. It is a confidence that gains renewal as often as possible, but does not lessen, in the meantime.

What makes possible this confidence is a kind of metaphysical awareness that, in sharing genuinely what he believes, he does all he can; the rest is up to others. Since he cannot influence directly the opinions of others, the only *reasonable* move is to *abandon* himself to confidence. Only through such abandonment does one become a "ministering spirit."

A "ministering spirit" who remains so throughout his criticism, is probably one of the rarest individuals upon this Earth. But there are few accomplishments more

praiseworthy, or more beneficial to oneself and others. —But only through criticism in return can he achieve and maintain this status. One cannot be a “ministering spirit” only to oneself.

One must therefore *critique* what the critic says—not take it at face value—so as to avoid depriving him of this opportunity, and so that he, the critic, may benefit others regardless of whether his criticism is accepted. If someone’s criticism is unhelpful, it often *helps* to eliminate it as such, so that one may better recognize what criticism one is seeking.

<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. Prefaces. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997. 17. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>3</sup> I will capitalize this word to signify that higher form of truth which exists for every man; what Kierkegaard often refers to as the “universally human.”

<sup>4</sup> The present work is a perfect example of this dependency, wherein I now reference and attempt to broaden a Kierkegaardian principle that has survived nearly two hundred years.

<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing. Radford, VA: A & D Publishing, 2008. 65. Print.

<sup>6</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. The Sickness Unto Death. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980. 13. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997. 308. Print.

## Out of this Rage and a Triumphant Sorrow: James Baldwin Revisited

I first came across James Baldwin's name in 1960 or 1961, possibly in Norman Mailer's "Talent in the Room" piece. The first of his books that I read were the collections of essays, *Notes of a Native Son* and *Nobody Knows My Name*, possibly after reading a review of the latter in *The New York Times*. The first of his novels that I read was *Another Country*. After that, I read pretty much everything he wrote up to *The Devil Finds Work*, which appeared in 1976. James Baldwin was therefore a big presence for me among the contemporary American writers that I had begun to discover after polishing off the Classic American Novel in high school. He was in effect the next black writer on the block, taking his place alongside Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, though we had of course all read Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen in our high school anthologies and I remember a lively little black poet running around the Village with a knapsack slung over his shoulder and reading occasionally in the coffee houses.

In the late Forties a big crop of young American writers had emerged—Mailer, Vidal, Capote, Willingham—and now we had Jones, Styron, Roth, Updike, Kerouac, Salinger, and Baldwin too. These were heady times for readers of fiction. I can't say what Baldwin taught me about black or "Negro" life. I already had a very clear sense of how blacks lived in America. These were the Fifties and early Sixties of course, but nonetheless, not too many years ago, it irritated me to no end when some black middle-class columnist came down on Allen Iverson for being an ingrate after living a privileged and pampered life as a basketball star since his early teens. This was with reference to his gangsta mode. I'm almost ashamed to be the one to have to tell him this, but the conclusion to be drawn is not that Iverson is an ingrate but that not even making 15 or 20 million dollars a year can wipe away the shame and humiliation experienced by black Americans at the hands of America's white population. It was with

this sense of black life in America that I first read James Baldwin. Now I prepare to read him again with a certain measure of curiosity, wondering how the books will strike me today.

Baldwin was born in Harlem but went to Clinton High in the Bronx. Later he lived in the Village and then in Paris. He died in 1987, at the age of 63. His first published novel was *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), which I would read much later. In addition to the essays he also wrote another novel in the Fifties, *Giovanni's Room*, and the play *The Amen Corner*, which I believe I saw in Jerusalem during one of the Israel Festivals, and in the Sixties, after *Another Country*, the impassioned *Fire Next Time* and also *Blues for Mr. Charlie* (or maybe this was the play I saw in Jerusalem), as well as publishing *Going to Meet the Man* (a collection of stories, including the famous "Sonny's Blues") and another novel, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*.

Baldwin wrote as a Negro, that is, as someone whose identity and consequently experience and condition had been fixed by others on the basis of the color of his skin. I read him today as a Jew, not because he also addresses the subject of black antisemitism but because the Jew has found himself in a similar position and has responded in an entirely different way and I cannot help making the comparison. As for the black antisemitism, Baldwin discusses it in one of these early essays ("The Harlem Ghetto"), and also twenty or so years later, in pretty much the same terms, in *The New York Times* ("Negroes are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White"). I find little to argue with there. Negroes or African Americans perhaps were or are antisemitic because they are anti-white (and maybe for all the other reasons that Baldwin mentions as well: envy, disappointment, experiences with Jewish ghetto merchants and landlords, etc.), but also, of course, and mainly, because this was the message of Christianity for nearly 2,000 years and therefore also what they heard in their churches. Baldwin certainly understands this ("When the Negro hates the Jew *as a Jew* he does so partly because the nation does ..."). It is, by the way, supremely ironic that many of the black Americans who repudiated Christianity rushed into the arms of Islam, whose practitioners are the ones who hunted them down in Africa and sold them into slavery.



But I do not have an axe to grind with African Americans. On the contrary, I consider their treatment the most disgraceful chapter in American history. By 1860, all the countries of Europe had abolished slavery, at home and in their colonies. In the Americas, only Brazil and the United States had not. Lincoln himself did not intend to abolish it, only to ban it in new states. Even the Emancipation Proclamation grew out of his wish to give the South a jolt, with a period of grace to allow individual Confederate states to rejoin the Union and thereby preserve the institution of slavery there. The subsequent history of race relations in America has been marked by fear and hatred. The disgrace, in the first hundred years after the Civil War, and even in the next fifty years, taking us into the 21st century, stigmatizes not just the racists but the bystanders as well, just as all Germans bore the guilt for the persecution and ultimate extermination of the Jews. It may seem unfair to demand of ordinary people, in Germany and in the South and even up North, that they put themselves in the line of fire in the name of justice and their own humanity, but this is the ultimate moral test, and like the Germans, the Americans have failed it, destroying, without knowing it or wanting to know it, as Baldwin reminds us, hundreds of thousands of lives, for which "time and history will never forgive them." Americans did not, of course, send America's Negroes to the gas chambers, but certainly they dehumanized them and took away every shred of dignity and self-respect they might have had. "[Your grandfather] is dead," writes Baldwin to his nephew in *The Fire Next Time*, "he never saw you, and he had a terrible life; he was defeated long before he died because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him." What white people said about him, however, was less destructive, in actual fact, than what they stole from him, and that was his past. The Africans taken off the slave ships no longer had a past, no longer had an ordered society, no longer had a tradition, no longer had a system of beliefs. They had nothing that might fortify them when "it was spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that [they] were worthless human beings" who could only be rescued by white civilization.

In these early essays, Baldwin tells us what it is like for a black man to live in a racist country and also something of what it is like for a black man to live in Europe,

where "he can reach out to everyone ... is accessible to everyone and open to everything" ("The Discovery of What It Means To Be an American"). He also writes about André Gide ("The Male Prison"), Ingmar Bergman ("The Northern Protestant"), Norman Mailer ("The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy"), and a great deal about Richard Wright, whom he once idolized but from whom he parted company when he could no longer see *Native Son* and the doomed Bigger Thomas as paradigms for the black American condition. However, it is Harlem more than anything else that Baldwin writes about here, Harlem as a state of mind, though with not a little about the South as well. In Atlanta, he tells us, an old black man directs him to a segregated bus and seems to understand what Baldwin is feeling, just as Baldwin understands that he will never see the hell that the old man has seen, which was, simply, "that he had never in his life owned anything, not his wife, not his house, not his child, which could not, at any instant, be taken from him by the power of white people" ("Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter from the South").

"The people in Harlem," Baldwin writes in "Fifth Avenue, Uptown," "know they are living there because white people do not think they are good enough to live anywhere else." For this reason they hate the projects, and for this reason the police, "representing the force of the white world," patrol the streets like an occupying army in a hostile country. And those who go downtown "to meet 'the man' ... struggle to instill in their children some private sense of honor and dignity," which means "that they must struggle, stolidly, incessantly, to keep this sense alive in themselves, in spite of the insults, the indifference, and the cruelty they are certain to encounter in their working day," while at home the women attack the children's hair with hard brushes and vaseline to make it look less "nappy" and grease their arms and legs to make them look less "ashy" though they understand "that none of this effort would release one from the stigma and danger of being a Negro," only increasing "the shame and the rage."

And there is, I should think, no Negro living in America who has not felt, briefly or for long periods, with anguish sharp or dull, in varying degrees and to varying effect, simple, naked and unanswerable hatred; who has not wanted to smash any white face he may encounter in a day, to violate, out of motives of the cruelest vengeance, their women, to break

the bodies of all white people and bring them low, as low as that dust into which he himself is being trampled ... ["Many Thousands Gone"]

I mentioned that the Jew has responded differently to the revilement of the white Christian world. What I mean to say is that, unlike the African American, he has not been diminished by it. He did not, and could not, lose his sense of worth, of moral and spiritual superiority, of *chosenness*, even, and particularly, when his face was being ground into the dust under the boots of his persecutors. It may even be said that the Jew regarded his Christian tormentors in precisely the same way that white American bigots regarded Negroes—not with hatred, because they were faceless, but, as a class, with contempt, and certainly with fear. To put it very simply, the popular Jewish image of the Pole, the Russian, the Ukrainian, the Lithuanian, the Latvian, as well as of their brothers in spirit around the world, was of a drunkard and wife beater, no more and no less. This is what the Jew saw when he contemplated the antisemite. This was the face of Poland and Russia and Latvia and Lithuania and of the Irishman who called him a kike and of the German who called him a hymie and of the good old boy who called him a sheeny. This was the Christian world.

Paradoxically, though not surprisingly, the further removed a Jew was from his Jewishness, the more vulnerable he became to antisemitism. For then he had nothing to fall back on, then he had nothing to sustain him and was indeed like the black man, but the shock of being vilified was deeper because he had deceived himself into believing that he could be like everyone else. So it was among the assimilated Jews of Germany who thought of themselves as Germans, for it is always shocking for a Jew who believes he has escaped his Jewishness to be called out on it. So it was in England and France and America as Jews broke loose from the ties of their religion and their culture and found themselves adrift in a hostile environment. Only the Jewishness of the Jew, which he bore within him, could immunize him to the insults of the antisemites, but the blackness of the Negro, which he wore on his skin, exposed him to the revilement of the racists.

One would like to think that Americans are more decent today than they were 70 years ago when Baldwin, who was doing defense work in New Jersey, was turned away from restaurants because they "didn't serve Negroes." But of course Americans are not more decent today and couldn't care less whether African Americans are allowed to use white toilets, eat in white restaurants or attend white schools in the South or anywhere else. One way or the other, it isn't their business and they have a lot more important things on their minds. African American civil rights were visited upon them by a small minority of "activists" and if the result was to see more of these black folks on TV acting just like white folks and sometimes even talking like them, it wasn't something they were going to get excited about as long as it wasn't on their block. Because they are the Silent Majority and tend to go along with whatever catches on. White Americans got used to seeing black Americans in new contexts and were more than willing to concede that they deserved equal rights while continuing to regard them, in the ghettos, as dangerous animals or, in the best of circumstances, as having become civilized and being pretty much like themselves except for the fact that they really weren't. Baldwin describes very nicely what this civilization is and how civilized people actually live and act, in America and elsewhere, so there is no need to go over that ground again, other than to say that it is doubtful if very many of his liberal white readers ever saw themselves in the picture of America that he has given us though they are right there to be seen by anyone who is honest with himself.

What enabled white liberals to lament the "Negro problem" without reference to themselves, as Baldwin notes in "Many Thousands Gone," was their treatment of it as a social problem rather than as a personal problem. By treatment I mean their manner of speaking about it and writing about it, because it would not have occurred to the vast majority of them to do anything about it. As long as it was a social problem, it was America's problem, and therefore the people who were supposed to deal with such problems, at the administrative level, so to speak, were the ones who would have to solve it. Baldwin, on the other hand, saw the problem as deeply personal, as representing, in fact, a severe and basic flaw in the American character, something that involves the question of identity, or the absence of it, and the inability of Americans to

come to terms with who and what they are. Baldwin suggests that it is related to the classlessness of American society, and this is a very astute observation, for the idea of equality is surely one of the most disastrous ideas ever devised by Western man, forcing each individual to reinvent his idea of himself and his relationship to others. The manner in which Americans have constructed their social and personal identities in this environment is a very complex matter and has claimed many victims, not the least prominent of whom are African Americans.

For the idea or ideal of equality becomes very problematic in a society founded on inequality. All men are of course not created equal but even when they are they do not remain equal for very long, for some men are more "successful" than others and are rewarded accordingly. This is the American way. These rewards and their visible signs accord status and are most often monetary. "In a way," writes Baldwin, "status became a kind of substitute for identity" and "money and the things money can buy the universally accepted symbol of status" ("In Search of a Majority"). But of course, if wealth accords status and is the supreme symbol of success, then most Americans, by their own standards, are failures, and the terrible message conveyed to them in a classless society where all men are said to be created equal is that they have no one to blame for it but themselves. This is very hard to swallow and it is enough to contemplate the American film heroes to understand the depth of the feelings of resentment and inadequacy buried in the American psyche, or to consider the susceptibility of Americans to the messages of the advertising industry.

Not very many people can live with the unflattering idea of themselves that the American ethos has forced them to entertain, and Americans have not surprisingly gone to great lengths to mask it, first and foremost by insisting that they are as good as anyone else, that is, that the idea of equality continues to apply regardless of their personal circumstances, one result of which is that they are forever on guard and quick to spot anyone who "puts on airs" and acts as if he is "better" than they are, whether by an ostentatious display of wealth or even something as innocuous as refined manners or refined speech. Hence too the notorious American anti-intellectualism or distrust of ideas, which are the province of elites, and the celebration of "common

sense," which is the province of everyone, and hence the quickness of many to "identify" with America itself and all its achievements (which are not their own), becoming great patriots in the process and disdainful of all other nations, not to mention the mass hysteria provoked by the Communists and the beatniks, almost in equal measure, when they attacked America where it was most vulnerable, namely, in the injustice of its economic system and in the hollowness of its values. But this is just one layer in the construction of an identity. In order to magnify or deceive themselves, Americans require a great deal more than the insistence that they are as good as the next person when all evidence suggests that they are not.

Racism or bigotry therefore has a function as well as a cause. The most common explanation, in fact, is that people require someone lower than themselves in order to affirm their own worth, though of course not all racists and bigots are at the bottom of the social ladder. This is a universal phenomenon generally making itself felt in direct proportion to the abjectness of the racist's circumstances and, it should be added, the defectiveness of his character. Baldwin states this very plainly: "In a way, the Negro tells us where the bottom is: *because he is there*, and *where* he is, beneath us, we know where the limits are and how far we must not fall. We must not fall beneath him. We must never allow ourselves to fall that low ..." ("In Search of a Majority"). Sartre too, in his well-known study of the antisemite, portrays the racist in these same terms: "There is a passionate pride among the mediocre, and antisemitism is an attempt to give value to mediocrity as such, to create an elite of the ordinary.... To this end the antisemite finds the existence of the Jew absolutely necessary. Otherwise to whom would he be superior?" Further, the antisemite is a man who fears himself,

his conscience, his freedom, his instincts, his responsibilities, solitude, change, society and the world.... Antisemitism, in a word, is fear of the human condition. The antisemite is a man who wants to be a pitiless rock, a furious torrent, a destructive force—anything but a man.

He has made himself an antisemite because that is something one cannot be alone. The phrase "I hate the Jews" is one that is echoed in chorus; in pronouncing it, one attaches oneself to a tradition—the tradition and community of the mediocre.

This is the manner in which the weak build their identities, and in America, where far more people are weak than strong, the racist builds his personal identity around the figure of the black man, deriving this identity from his *reputation* as a racist, becoming someone to be reckoned with, someone who is noticed, immutable, impervious, truly hard as rock. But only the strongest among the racists can stand alone or become the leaders of men, become Hitlers or George Lincoln Rockwells, finding their strength within themselves, being taken in, as it were, by their own lies or their own pathologies. Most are too weak and cowardly to stand alone. They are followers. They require a mob or gang from which to draw strength. They require a *social* identity to fortify a fragile personal identity. "Look at those niggers," a man will say in the company of those who think like him, and feel the comradely warmth and reassurance of their presence.

But American racism also revolves around a second cause, and that is the idea of the black man's "carnality," whose roots Baldwin finds in the old Christian link between "darkness" and sin or evil or damnation but also in the white man's sexual insecurity, which leads him to project his fears and anxieties, his worst nightmares as it were, onto the figure of the black man. It is of course inconceivable, down South but also up North, that white men could ever have seen black men as *rivals* capable of winning their women by virtue of their superior sexual prowess or endowments, if only for the simple reason that there were no conventional social frameworks where it was possible for black men to approach white women. If anything, they saw, and see, black men as capable of seizing their women and raping them, and the idea of black carnality is what moves their minds in this direction, for it is true that the fact of black physicality stares them in the face, though they would not feel intimidated or threatened by it were it not for their own lack of manliness.

The sexual immaturity of Americans, along with their general childishness, has been noted by not a few observers. Leslie Fiedler, for one, noted that "the great works of American fiction are notoriously at home in the children's section of the library, their level of sentimentality precisely that of a pre-adolescent." (But children, of course, can also be cruel, callous, brutal, just as murderers can be sentimental.) For Baldwin, this

immaturity or childishness derives ultimately from a peculiarly American inability to accept reality, to accept the tragic dimension of life, to accept the fact of death ("for white Americans do not believe in death, and this is why the darkness of my skin so intimidates them"), and finally to love—"not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth" (*The Fire Next Time*).

Innocence, the idea of a lost Eden, he believes, is at the heart of the Southern "hysteria," for the Southerner remembers, "historically and in his own psyche," a time when "he loved black people and black people loved him," and the anguish of losing this love to history causes in him "indescribable torment," as well as deep resentment. However, the nostalgia for an ideal and innocent past is also connected to the failure of Americans to live up to some very high moral standard, a Puritan standard, in fact, and the attendant guilt, and hence too the peculiarly American idealization of moral, and sexual, purity, which has the same Christian roots as their terror of darkness—an ideal, needless to say, that also attaches itself to the classic American film hero (had these movie heroes realized how much was being loaded onto them, they would surely have collapsed under the weight).

And yet, out of all this, in Baldwin's life, out of his own torment and anguish and rage, there came something entirely unexpected, stated explicitly in the essays and developed throughout the novels: his determination not to be destroyed by his hatred of white people ("I saw that the bitterness which had helped to kill my father could also kill me"), to live, in fact, by love, to accept "life as it is and men as they are," to fight the injustice that was part of them, to free one's heart from hatred and despair. Baldwin lived an embattled life, but he also lived as an artist. This was his calling, and the means by which he would bear witness.

I confess that Baldwin's first two novels, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room*, did not make a strong impression on me when I first read them. I imagine that this was because I read them after I read *Another Country*, which was the bigger novel and surrounded by a great deal of fanfare, so the feeling was anticlimactic.



I read them now very slowly and very attentively, and find that I understand them a little better this time around.

These first two novels came out of Baldwin's two worlds—the world of his color and the world of his homosexuality—and so that the two would not be confused, though they were both related to his condition as an outsider, but also because the theme and ultimate tragedy of *Giovanni's Room* are connected to Americanness as such, he makes all the characters of the second novel white, including the narrator. It was only in *Another Country* that these two worlds would come together.

*Go Tell It on the Mountain* is the story of a black family living in Harlem. It is told in a form that Baldwin would favor in all his fiction—long sections moving back and forth in time. It begins with John, waking up on his fourteenth birthday in March 1935, and ends with John again, later that day, in the storefront church where his stepfather occasionally preaches, experiencing a powerful and profound vision. The three middle sections tell the stories of his aunt, his stepfather and his mother.

The family too is a kind of prototype that Baldwin will return to more than once: the bitter, defeated father, the enduring mother, the troubled brother. It mirrors, to a great extent, Baldwin's own family, for he himself was preaching in his own stepfather's church at the age of fourteen. Like Baldwin, John rebels against the church, but his story is a story of salvation.

The church which is at the center of the family's life is four blocks down the street, on Lenox Avenue. There, after Sunday school, Brother Elisha sits down at the piano and raises a song to begin the service and the sainted sisters dressed in white join in and the sinners testify, sometimes rolling on the ground. John has a younger brother, Roy, and two younger sisters, his stepfather's natural children. And he hates his stepfather for rejecting and abusing him and is sustained by this hatred and by his intelligence which his father cannot reach. And his mother with "dark, hard lines running downward from her eyes, and the deep, perpetual scowl in her forehead, and the down-turned, tightened mouth," and dirt everywhere in the house, and the ceiling sagging, and the paint peeling.

John's mother gives him a little money to buy himself a birthday gift and he is off, cutting through Central Park, where he climbs a hill in the snow that still covers the ground and contemplates the temptations of the city and the narrow way of the cross that awaits him and "a house like his father's house." And on Fifth Avenue he dreams of having a white man's life, "in the world, and of the world ..." but his father had said that white people were wicked and couldn't be trusted and never loved a nigger, cheating them, and beating them, and burning them back in the South where he had come from, and that God would bring them low. And niggers did not of course live in these fine New York streets and he knew that he might hate white people if God did not change his heart. And then to a movie on 42nd Street, seeing *Of Human Bondage*, where an evil woman cruelly deceives a crippled student, and he wants to be like her, only more powerful, more cruel, and make those who hurt him suffer, but when she dies he believes the Lord has led him there, to the movie theater, to show him the wages of sin.

When John gets back, the house is in an uproar, for Roy, his younger brother, has been stabbed in the street, and his father is by his side gently wiping the blood away and speaking loving words to the boy but shouting at his mother for letting him go out, and harsh words exchanged with his sister, Florence, who has also arrived, and striking his wife now and Roy cursing him and whipping the boy with his belt. And then to church.

And now Baldwin tells the story of John's aunt and stepfather and of his mother, Elizabeth. Now the mother of Florence and Gabriel Grimes had been born a slave and two of her children had been auctioned on the block and another one had been fathered by the master of the house and also taken from her and after emancipation a neighbor's daughter raped by white men in the field and the girl's father beaten nearly to death by white folks on a rampage. And Florence coming North, in the year 1900, when she is 26, and marrying Frank, who sang the blues and drank too much and left her after ten years of troubled marriage and died in the war in France.

And Gabriel, who Florence left behind to care for their sick mother, surrendering to the Lord when he is 21 after living a life of sin because he wanted the power of the

Lord to be inside him and begins to preach and is sustained by the pious, spinsterish Deborah, the girl who had been raped, in her thirties now, and marries her, but is drawn to Esther, a sinner as he once was, and lies with her despite his dedication to the Lord, and has a son by her but repudiates them and steals some money from Deborah to send them away. And Esther dying up North and the boy, called Royal, brought home by her family, and watching him grow like a stranger, and then he is a man and murdered in a Chicago bar. And Deborah dying too now and knowing all his secrets and chastising him for sending Esther away.

And Elizabeth's mother dying young and her father, a pimp, whom she loved, banished by the aunt who raises her. And then Richard, who takes her out of the South, and she loved him more than she could love God, and for her pride and lust He had taken him from her, she was sure of that, up in New York, pregnant now but not telling him, and the two of them together until he is falsely accused of a robbery and arrested and beaten and finally released, and in his rented room he throws himself down on the bed and weeps and shakes and clings to her and in the night he cuts his wrists. And her son John is born and Gabriel coming North and meeting her through Florence and she gives her heart to the Lord as he wishes her to and they marry and he promises to love her son.

In the church that evening, John feels the hand of God upon him and throws himself down on the ground, on the threshing floor before the altar. And he is in anguish and a voice is telling him to rise up from the ground but he feels himself being pulled down into the abysmal darkness, away from the light while he yearns for the mountaintop. And visions of his father tormenting him. And an ironic voice questioning his father's faith. And John hears a sound that he has been hearing all his life without knowing what it was and knows it now and it is in him—the sound of silent rage and weeping. And he struggles to flee this darkness into the land of the living. And he begs the Lord for mercy and the voice says, "Go through," and John whispers, "Lift me up," and the voice says again, "Go through," and his soul is anchored in the love of God and he is saved.

So the novel ends with this remarkable piece of sustained writing and yet a sense that all of John's demons have not been expelled and that there is a long road ahead, a long journey that he must still make.

This is a profoundly moving novel. Some are convinced that it is Baldwin's finest. I come away from it with an almost claustrophobic feeling, of a closed world, and of the utter hopelessness of black life in America. The Harlem home, the Harlem church, the Harlem street are connected to nothing in the white world, are not part of that world, occupy, it may be said, another dimension of it from which ghostlike figures regularly emerge but are perceived only as dark stains in one's field of vision and are therefore never invited to sit down at the table of life with those who hope and dream. This is one of the most authentic documents we have of the inner life of black Americans in that time and that place and wherever they are herded together by white people, who exist in the novel as a kind of invisible offstage presence setting the bounds of the black world along with the terms of its existence. Baldwin had set out to delineate the beginnings of a personal journey but he had also tried to understand his parents' generation and the roots of its despair, perhaps, even, so that he might love them better and illuminate the meaning of their lives in the work that was to come. Nothing is clearer in the novel than the anguish in which it was written.

The second novel, *Giovanni's Room*, follows Baldwin into his self-imposed exile from America. It opens with the narrator alone in a big house in the south of France on the night before what will be "the most terrible morning" of his life. The novel had been turned down by Alfred A. Knopf, which had published *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, warning him that it would damage his growing reputation and alienate his audience. There had of course been "homosexual" novels in America before his, by Capote and Vidal for example, but Baldwin was in the process of becoming liberal America's "official" Negro writer and that was the single dimension in which they wished to see him. In the end it was published by Dial and by Michael Joseph in England and fairly well received.

The story the narrator will tell is also a Sartrean one. It is a story about living the truth of oneself, and also about the destructiveness of denying it. David, the narrator,

living in Paris at the time, had asked his girlfriend Hella to marry him and she had gone off to Spain to work things out in her mind, but before she comes back he meets Giovanni.

David remembers his only previous homosexual experience, as a teenager with another boy, and his flight from it, deciding "to allow no room in the universe for something which shamed and frightened me." But Giovanni is irresistible, up from some Italian village, young, handsome, charming, forthright, and even ironic, especially about Americans, a bartender in a "dubious" bar owned by a "disgusting old fairy" named Guillaume, and then to Giovanni's room, and "he pulled me against him.... With everything in me screaming *No!* yet the sum of me sighed *Yes!*"

And then his life in Giovanni's room, first with "joy and amazement" and later in "anguish and fear" when David realizes and Giovanni understands that he will leave him for Hella, who is now on her way back from Spain, though at first, when David tells him about her, he regards her with amusement as no more than a mistress, like the mistresses he himself has had. And now Giovanni is fired by Guillaume when he resists his advances and David knows that he will not help him with the money his father has sent from America. And then there opens in him a hatred for Giovanni as powerful as his love as he understands that the "beast which Giovanni had awakened ... would never go to sleep again" and that one day he might be pursuing boys down dark avenues like all the others.

"I do not know what I would do if you left me," Giovanni tells David. And then Hella is back, prepared to marry him, and when he returns to Giovanni's room there is a scene and Giovanni sobbing and begging David not to leave him, saying, "You never loved anyone.... You love your purity. You love your mirror. You want to be clean.... You want to leave Giovanni. He makes you stink. You want to kill him in the name of all your lying little moralities." And from here, Giovanni becoming little more than a street boy, and finally killing Guillaume, who again pursues him, and David, on the longest night of his life, awaiting Giovanni's execution, though even before that, in the big house in the south of France that he had rented with Hella to get away from Giovanni, he begins to find her "stale, her body uninteresting, her presence grating." And then he

goes off with a sailor and Hella finds him and finally understands what she had only suspected and returns to America alone.

For Baldwin, what we call homosexuality or bisexuality is something that goes beyond sexual orientation; it is the ability to give sexual expression to feelings of love irrespective of gender, and I suppose that Baldwin would see this as a positive thing for all men, and certainly for those who feel the inclination, though the terror of opening this door inhibits most men from physical contact with one another other than in ritualized ways. This kind of love would be seen later in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* when the two young brothers, Leo and Caleb, are in bed together and in *Another Country* when Vivaldo sleeps with Eric. For David, on the other hand, his inability to "declare" for Giovanni is connected, again, to his Americanness, in effect, to the inability to think of love unsentimentally and overcome the desperate will to conventional happiness. This is the innocence (or childishness) of Americans, which is always magnified in a European setting:

And what distinguished the men was that they seemed incapable of age; they smelled of soap, which seemed indeed to be their preservative against the dangers and exigencies of any more intimate odor; the boy he had been shone, somehow, unsullied, untouched, unchanged, through the eyes of the man of sixty, booking passage, with his smiling wife, to Rome. His wife might have been his mother, forcing more oatmeal down his throat, and Rome might have been the movie she had promised him to see. Yet I suspected that what I was seeing was but a part of the truth ... beneath these faces, these clothes, accents, rudenesses, was power and sorrow, both unadmitted, unrealized, the power of inventors, the sorrow of the disconnected.

In a sense, Giovanni's room is the world and the novel is a picture of how Americans live and love inauthentically in this world, unable to break out of themselves and embrace the "stink" of life. To the extent that the "dark" Giovanni is a stand-in for the black man, the novel is also, analogously, about the inability of white Americans to overcome their history and break out of the prison of race. With these two novels Baldwin had established the terms and boundaries of his fictional worlds.

Baldwin's style was strongly literary and quite formal—if there was a decisive influence it was surely Henry James—the exposition, for all its rhetorical flourishes, awash in a sea of commas and parenthetical phrases (" ... the virtues of which, if not less crude, have also become, abruptly, *simple*, and *real*"), which carries over from the essays into the fiction, and while the prose of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* carries with it a biblical influence too, in *Giovanni's Room* the effect is of Jamesian restraint and even detachment, though it is precisely this detachment that gives the novel its force. Norman Mailer had written that Baldwin seemed incapable of saying "Fuck you!" to his readers. In his next novel, *Another Country*, he did in fact say it many times, though not altogether convincingly, it must be said, for Baldwin was never able to achieve that easy mix of high and low English, fathered by Henry Miller, that would come to characterize postwar American writing.

*Another Country* begins with a long chapter that follows the decline of Rufus Scott, a black jazz drummer, culminating in his suicide. The rest of the novel concerns itself with the people around him: Vivaldo Moore, a would-be writer; Ida Scott, Rufus's sister, a singer who becomes Vivaldo's lover; Cass Silenski, wife of Richard Silenski, Vivaldo's former high school English teacher and mentor, now reaching success himself as a novelist; and Eric Jones, a homosexual actor just back from Paris. The year is 1956. The milieu is Greenwich Village and Harlem, outside the mainstream of American life. The other country is the country of love and the characters cross the lines of race and sex to enter it. It is a dense, complex, finely nuanced work of the kind, in fact, that Norman Mailer himself might and should have written, perhaps even on a larger scale, but never would, imprisoned as he was in his idea of himself as much as Baldwin's characters are imprisoned in their color and their gender.

We meet Rufus Scott coming out of a movie house near Times Square, hungry, filthy, "one of the fallen" wandering the streets of New York and riding the subways through the night. Seven months earlier he had been on top of the world, just after a gig in Harlem, and then a blonde girl, her body too thin, her colorless face the face of the Southern poor white, and he wanted her and plays with her a little and torments her a little, and she gives herself to him completely and loves him, and they are

together though all around them he feels the eyes of the white world measuring him and remembers boot camp in the South and a white officer's foot in his face. And then cursing and beating the woman because she is white and he is black and he cannot accept her love because he cannot accept himself and both of them drinking and out of work and the woman committed to Bellevue and sent back to the South half-mad.

And now, wandering the streets, he lets himself be picked up for a meal by a "big rough-looking man" but breaks away at the last minute, and remembers sleeping with his friend Eric, and despising him, and shows up at Vivaldo's place, saying, "I don't want to die," and beginning to cry, and Vivaldo, helpless, wanting to comfort him, even physically, but afraid to, takes him out to eat and to a bar where they run into Cass and Richard with news that Richard has sold his novel and Rufus slipping away and the long subway ride uptown and out on the bridge and falling.

And now Ida, his sister, looking for him and arriving at the Silenskis' apartment and everyone waiting for Rufus to show up and finally learning the truth. Then Vivaldo and Ida in a tempestuous love affair and Eric arriving from Paris and waiting for his young, Giovanni-like lover to join him and Richard in his newfound fame neglecting Cass and Cass and Eric sleeping together and Eric and Vivaldo together too and Ida with a TV producer to advance her career and Ida and Vivaldo again, loving each other and Vivaldo weeping as "her long fingers stroked his back ... stroking his innocence out of him."

Not a great deal happens in the novel once Rufus is dead. The characters, like prize fighters, are thrown together in confrontations that become more and more bitter as the novel proceeds and the characters fail each other, becoming "equal in misery, confusion, and despair"—Vivaldo and Ida, Cass and Richard—their fights engineered, it must be said, almost as crudely as those in the soap operas, starting at the drop of a hat, so to speak. But it is Vivaldo whom Baldwin examines most closely. He bears the burden of both race and gender and the crippling "Americanness" that Baldwin went to such great lengths to describe. For he cannot come out of himself and love Ida without seeing her blackness and all the things it represents for him—guilt, lust, escape—just as Ida resents him for not knowing who she is, resents him, and punishes



him, as a proxy or surrogate for the whole white race, giving him only what she had decided she could afford to give. And he cannot forgive himself for not embracing Rufus in his hour of need and perhaps saving him, and finds a kind of redemption in Eric's arms, and it is when he contemplates Eric's face, which is neither entirely masculine nor entirely feminine but contains great force and great gentleness, that he discovers something of his own nature as he prepares to enter a region where there were "no definitions of any kind, neither of color, nor of male and female. There was only the leap and the rendering and the terror and the surrender ... the horror and anguish and joy of love" that he still may find with Ida in that other country.

Baldwin's characters reflect, as profoundly and as vividly as any in literature, the way we are shaped by the nature of the society in which we live, which is not always apparent in fiction. When literature looks at society it tends to see it in monolithic terms against which or within which human lives are played out, and often destroyed, like the lives of Anna Karenina or Emma Bovary. Baldwin sees society through the prism of our inner worlds, and in the case of race and sex in America as creating a sick and destructive environment causing us to destroy ourselves if we do not transcend it. Because the price has been so high, and because what his characters endure, in very human terms, is so real and so deadly, it is tempting to dismiss a great deal of fiction as trivial, and this is perhaps a built-in advantage that Baldwin has over other novelists. His characters, after all, do not suffer from Jewish mothers or existential angst. They suffer from the conditions of life in America, out of which they must forge an authentic identity or perish.

*Another Country* was a big American novel, called "searing, violent, brilliantly and fiercely told" by *The New York Times*, selling better than all his other books and, with the publication of *The Fire Next Time* a year later, placing him in the forefront of contemporary American literature. Baldwin was now a national figure, active too in the civil rights movement and spending more time in America after returning from Europe in 1957 for his third visit to the United States in nine years, and even on the cover of *Time* magazine. His next work of fiction, published three years after *Another Country*, was *Going to Meet the Man*, a collection of eight stories, the earliest going back to 1948

and introducing the Grimes family of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. The best known of the stories is of course "Sonny's Blues," where a somewhat prissy black schoolteacher discovers the meaning of his wayward younger brother's life and perhaps his own in the blues his brother plays on the piano, but, for me, no less striking are two other stories in the collection, "The Man Child" and the title story. The first, about the murder of a child, is unlike anything Baldwin ever wrote, fablelike, almost Gothic, even Faulkneresque, with a strange pulsing style of exposition and mesmerizing cadences in the dialogue. The boy's father teases and torments his best friend, who has lost his farm and whose wife has left him and who has nothing now, and two months later the friend kills his son. The effect of all this is a little chilling, saying something about loneliness and something about cruelty and something about the idea of posterity.

"Going to Meet the Man," too, is a very graphic and violent story, this time about a lynching down South and the obligatory mutilation and burning of the corpse, and then, in dead seriousness on Baldwin's part but just a hairbreadth away from crude parody, the protagonist, a white sheriff lying beside his wife and unable to get it up, remembers being taken to see the lynching as a child, and suddenly he is hard and says to her, "Come on, sugar, I'm going to do you like a nigger, just like a nigger, come on, sugar, and love me just like you'd love a nigger."

This brings us back to the idea of black carnality. A great deal has been said about it. Provocative white Northerners, like Norman Mailer, along with Baldwin, have said that it is there, as an idea in white people's minds. Defensive white Southerners, like Faulkner, have said that the notion is absurd, or at best entertained by middle-aged women. Jesse, the white sheriff, wants to inhabit the black man's body with all its endowments or to be inhabited by it like a hunter consuming the heart of a lion. And he imagines that his wife too craves the black man's mythic potency. This is the American nightmare played out to its bitter end, a nightmare created by white Americans and visited upon the entire black race.

The next novel was *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, narrated by Leo Proudhammer, a renowned black actor reflecting on his life after suffering a heart attack. It was this novel, I will say, that fixed in my mind my very strong and lasting

sense of Baldwin's humanity, which had perhaps not struck me so forcefully before, and which is what, ultimately, brought me back to him, though I must confess that as I read the novel today I find it a little less inspiring, and even a little tedious at times, though there are certainly some wonderful passages in it, including a deliciously sardonic parody of a Lee Strasberg-like drama guru "critiquing" his students ("We wish to help you to explore; we are not afraid of any discovery; we are dedicated to discovery.... We admire your motives. We were a revolutionary before you were born ... and the scene you have just attempted to play is a revolutionary scene").

The story that Leo tells is of another Harlem childhood with another defeated father and rebellious brother, and then the actors workshop in New Jersey, with not a little racial tension, and a lifelong friendship, sometimes amorous, with a white actress and a romantic attachment with a black militant, signifying Baldwin's own movement toward a more aggressive stance in the civil rights struggle, a stance that was somewhat less hopeful now about the capacity of love to heal America's racial wounds. The journey that Leo makes is in effect the journey that Baldwin made, from hatred and contempt ("My countrymen impressed me ... as being ... the most empty and unattractive in the world ... chattering, vicious, pathetic, hysterical, dishonest" with their "bland, white, happy, stupid faces ...") to love and forgiveness and finally to an affirmation of his life and art:

I realized the fabulous extent of my luck: I could, I *could*, if I kept the faith, transform my sorrow into life and joy. I might live in pain and sorrow forever, but, if I kept the faith, my life would never be useless. If I kept the faith I could do for others what I felt had not been done for me, and if I could do that, if I could give, I could live.

The last of Baldwin's novels that I read, for the first time now, is *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974). This is the story of "Tish" (Clementine Rivers) and "Fonny" (Alonzo Hunt), young lovers, soulmates since childhood, who are separated when Fonny is falsely accused of a rape and thrown in jail, and I read it with foreboding, expecting the worst, something heart-breaking, as if Baldwin has set out again to say: see what you have done to us.

Tish is pregnant. She visits Fonny in the Tombs as often as she can. They have a dedicated lawyer. The two families try to raise money for bail. Tish's mother flies down to Puerto Rico, where the rape victim who identified Fonny is staying, but cannot get her to change her story. One feels that things will not end well.

I think this is the most flawed of Baldwin's novels, at the most elementary literary level. Too often the narrator, Tish herself, sounds more like James Baldwin than like a nineteen-year-old Harlem homegirl, in such constructions as "despairingly masturbatory," "stunning confusion," "absolutely hideous, so loud, so blatant, so impervious and cruel" and "the key to illusion is complicity," and when she does sound like herself, the language is somehow forced, for in addition to being unable to mix high and low English, Baldwin was not really able to incorporate into his prose the cadences of an ethnic idiom, like Saul Bellow for example. But not only is Tish's voice a little off, there are also a number of somewhat jarring shifts in point of view where she narrates scenes she has not witnessed in an unlikely way, and one might also say that the good-hearted whites in the novel—the Jew who rents a loft to Fonny, the Italian shopkeeper who defends him to the police, the Spanish restaurant owner who gives him credit—are just a little too good.

But even this can be forgiven, for out of all of this something wonderful and again totally unexpected occurs, foreshadowed in what must be one of the most powerful and beautiful sentences Baldwin ever wrote:

And it was as though, out of these elements, this patience, my Daddy's touch, the sounds of my mother in the kitchen, the way the light fell, the way the music continued beneath everything, the movement of Ernestine's [her sister's] head as she lit a cigarette, the movement of her hand as she dropped the match into the ashtray, the blurred human voices rising from the street, out of this rage and a steady, somehow triumphant sorrow, my baby was slowly being formed.

For now, in the final pages of the novel, instead of defeat there is victory, victory of the only kind a black man in Fonny's circumstances can know in the white world, won by steeling himself against it, by refusing to be broken by it. Fonny is put in solitary after not allowing himself to be raped. He loses a tooth and almost an eye.

"Something hardens in him, something changes in him forever," for "he is fighting for his life," he is fighting for his unborn child and for the woman he loves. And he knows now that he cannot be broken. He knows that he will survive, whatever his fate may be. In this, in a manner of speaking, Baldwin had reclaimed and redeemed Elizabeth and Richard, the tragic lovers of his first novel. This was the answer he had found. This was the meaning of the journey, the journey of his race as well as of himself. This is what Beale Street is saying in the blues that are the story of the black man's life in America.

At this point I take leave of Baldwin, who was of course adored by critics of the self-flagellating variety, though a reaction did set in and a few attacked the quality of his fiction, resentful perhaps of having so much race and sex rammed down their throats, pointing, like Mario Puzo of all people, to "*cardboard characters* [my emphasis], a polemical rather than narrative tone, weak invention, and poor selection of incident." And it is true that at least the later novels are flawed, but, again, they are entirely redeemed by the anguish of his characters, which is as real as anything in American fiction, and by the picture of black life that he has given us, which is also as real as anything in American fiction, while the essays continue to be recognized as among the finest ever produced by an American. Nonetheless we will always place a mental asterisk after Baldwin's name as representing a special category, a special case, the case of the Negro or African American writer, which we wouldn't think to do even in the case of Jewish writers who write exclusively about Jews, for the Jewish American experience belongs to the American mainstream as much as the Italian American experience or the Irish American experience, and just as the assimilated Jewish American feels that the Western cultural heritage is his own and the African American does not, so American literature embraces Jewish fiction as part of its own tradition while Black American fiction remains outside it to the same extent that black Americans remain outside the mainstream of American life, separated by the barrier of color even when every other barrier has been torn down.

America has, in fact, managed to contain its "Negro problem" very nicely. It has created spaces where blacks and whites can mingle very visibly and very naturally without addressing the existence of this barrier. It has also created a body of laws and

rulings that eliminates the grosser public manifestations of racial discrimination without addressing the appalling conditions under which so many black Americans live as a result of this discrimination. Simply put, over half of African American families live in dire poverty or working class poverty with incomes of less than \$35,000 a year and a quarter of African Americans live on food stamps. Segregation arose, among other things, out of the conviction of white people that black people are different from themselves, and they of course are, visibly so, but only in the color of their skin, which is meaningless. That something that is meaningless should have sealed the fate of tens of millions of Americans is almost beyond comprehension. Whatever else white people attribute to black people—criminality, violence, ignorance, immorality, *inferiority*—is a direct result, to the extent that it exists, of the way they have been treated by white people. It is, after all, white people who created the ghettos and the inner cities, denied African Americans a decent education and decent employment, destroyed black families, consigned black children to lives of poverty and crime, And this after 250 years of slave labor. And while overt bigotry and racism become less and less fashionable and less and less acceptable, private bigotry, bigotry in the heart, remains what it always was and most Americans still wouldn't want their sisters to marry one, as it is phrased, and black Americans know this and know why, and it still makes their stomachs churn, especially if they have crossed the line, left the ghetto behind, become like us, writing jingles or trading in pork bellies; nor are white Americans about to assume responsibility for what they have done to the black population of America. Under Washington, we remember, the Federal government assumed the debts of the individual American colonies. Unfortunately there is no one today with the moral courage to assume the moral debt of the American people to African Americans. Like so much else in American life, this too has been swept under the rug, allowing Americans to ignore their own part in a crime of monumental proportions. But there is bound to be a reckoning, even if it is only at the pearly gates that pious Americans so desperately wish to enter. That will be the real fire next time, for if there is a hell, their victims would say, Americans will surely inhabit it.

Robert Joe Stout

## Mexico Típico

Children zigzag through the crowd hurling sausage-shaped balloons over the heads of teenagers snuggling on the low wall surrounding the city of Oaxaca, Mexico's cathedral. Vendors in *indigena* dress meander among blonde tourists, the majority of them focusing digital cameras on church spires and colonial balconies. A little orchestra pumps out sentimental classics as militarily attired police—restless, uncomfortable, most of them barely out of their teens—smoke cigarettes or suck lollipops and comment on the *tacos de ojo* (sexy young women) examining trinkets and blouses spread on blankets along the walkways.

Festive one wants to say. *Mexico típico*. But if one looks closely one perceives that many of those sitting at the sidewalk tables that border the Zócalo have nearly empty cups and glasses in front of them. Waiters lean against the pillars watching, waiting, as painted clowns with false noses and oversized shoes burlesque for a circle of spectators. Around the central kiosk stoop-shouldered men sit slightly apart reading the evening paper's *Nota Roja*.

"We come here because it's so dismal at home," a short, stocky Oaxacan grimaces as I sit down near him. From his backpack he pulls plastic bottles of fruit-flavored drink and *tortas* his wife made. She is thin, with worry lines around her eyes and mouth; her smile seems pained as she explains that she works in a boutique nearby and that he works most nights as a private security guard after finishing ten-hour shifts in a *vidrería*. Here in the Zócalo one can forget—at least temporarily—that she or he has little money to spend, sleeps three or four to a room, accrues 25 percent monthly interest on about-to-expire credit cards.

"Welcome to Rome in the time of the Caesars," a thin, wiry university graduate grunts mockingly. He introduces himself as "José Octavio" and says he has been working as a landscaper while studying to pass his law exams. "We live under a state of siege," he insists, lifting his hand to enumerate examples on thin, almost child-like fingers.

*Armed paramilitaries...arbitrary arrests...disappearances...bullet-riddled community radio transmitters...* My thoughts drift back to interviews I conducted in Central America twenty years before. Shopkeepers, taxi drivers, schoolteachers, farm workers described the dictatorships with frowns, shrugs: *"We avoid them [the militarized police] as best we can..." "All the young men are gone, there are shortages of everything, but we work, go to the market, go to mass..." "If we protest we are arrested or killed so we don't protest, we endure, we hope things will change..."*

Over two-thirds of the state's population earns too little to provide basic necessities for their families. Oaxaca spends millions of dollars to promote tourism but violence throughout Mexico has greatly diminished its popularity as a place to visit. Like Americans and Europeans, middleclass Mexicans throughout the country have curtailed expenses: Travel and tourism has become a luxury, not a recreation.

There have been—and there continue to be—protests in Oaxaca but engraved in the city's collective memory are brutal repressions directed against the civilian population. Throughout November, 2006 teargas filled the streets, police, armed soldiers and paramilitary *sicarios* arrested, assaulted, and kidnapped over 600 citizens, many of them members of the Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca. Hundreds more fled into exile and thousands who lost their incomes migrated to the United States.

For nearly six months, from May 2006 until November of that same year, the Popular Assembly (APPO for its initials in Spanish) had taken over what government existed in the city of Oaxaca.

"The citizenry was behind them," a professor from the Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca, the state university, remembers, "but unfortunately their timing was bad." Bad because Mexico's newly elected president Felipe Calderón needed the support of state governors to resist challenges to his election by opposition candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who had accused Calderón and the Bush administration-backed rightwing Partido Acción (PAN) of electoral fraud. Ruiz supported Calderón and the federal government sent over 4,000 heavily armed federal troops to Oaxaca.



"Brute force won out over pacific resistance," Oaxaca newspaper columnist Ernesto Reyes wrote. The Popular Assembly fell apart because the backbone of its membership, the Oaxaca section of the national Education Workers Union, pulled back after the state agreed to reclassify the salary base of its 70,000 teachers. The more radical elements of the Popular Assembly broke away amid denouncements of treason and selling out. What was left of the splintered movement boycotted the 2007 state legislature elections and Governor Ulisès Ruiz's candidates scored a unanimous coupe, winning every district.

"Criminal law is a prostitute who only accommodates those who are able to pay," Abraham Cruz, another aspiring attorney, quoted Plato in describing Oaxaca's legal system. Despite the election of an opposition coalition governor IN 2010 the assassinations of twenty-six Popular Assembly members remain unsolved. Former governor's Ruiz's political party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional PRI) still wields a powerful influence and controls many city and municipal *alcaldes* and presidents.

"Oaxaca exists in a larva stage," Cruz insists. The worms are eating everything. In the Zócalo, in the suburbs, in rural communities succumbing to alcoholism, beggary and premature death, one feels the infrastructure being gnawed away. In Huajuapán, in the Sierras between the city of Oaxaca and Mexico City, a desolate mother crouches on church steps twisting a torn shawl into tiny knots. She started to go inside to pray but, she tells me, she changed her mind because God, the saints, even the Virgin of Guadalupe, mock her loss of her children, her newest grandchild dead because her daughter's car broke down and she couldn't get to the hospital in time.

An installer for the Federal Electricity Commission in the same city sold his car and most of his furniture to pay ransom for one of his children. He did not go through the police because the kidnappers, he says, were police. "Oaxacan justice!" he snorts, turning his head to spit a bitter taste out of his mouth.

Yet in Huajuapán, as in other cities throughout the state, one hears music, laughter, church bells ringing. Thin children with bulging eyes sit amid broken curbing and parked motor scooters playing accordions and singing in loud, scratchy voices, plastic donation cups on the sidewalk in front of them. Teenagers race past armed

policemen walking two abreast under the streetlights. The restaurants are empty, only the cantinas that sell beer cheaply have customers. Pedestrians pause in front of store windows, cups of steamed corn or paper plates of tiny tostadas or napkin-wrapped hotdogs in their hands. Many who hold regular jobs moonlight as *ambulantes*—street merchants—selling trinkets, food, t-shirts or sunglasses to supplement their incomes.

Life in Oaxaca, the correspondent for a rural newspaper tells me, is sordid, the music, the laughter, is forced, a dancing on the coffin of the dead. The Archbishop of Oaxaca reiterates in weekly homilies that the deterioration is the result of the breakup of families and family values but Ugo Codevilla, author of *2006-2009 The Adverse Juncture*, insists that citizens who perceive that their leaders are corrupt and are lying to them cease to believe in the system and begin to feel that the only way to obtain what they want is to become as corrupt, as dishonest, as lacking in morality, as those leaders.

"Whether it's day or night, or whether police are present, doesn't matter to the *mafiosos* who rob and kidnap," Cruz laments. "Meanwhile drugs gnaw the intestines of those most valuable to society: the youth."

Despite increasing drug use among teenagers, despite the police state, thousands of closed businesses, mass migration and numbing inflation, daily life in Oaxaca superficially resembles daily life in most other cities in the world. Lines forty and fifty people long form in front of the ATMs on paydays and in front of the shopping mall cinemas on Wednesday "half price" nights. Store owners moonlight as taxi drivers and taxi drivers complain that the citizenry "is too cheap" to hire taxis.

The *abastos*—centralized marketplaces filled with stalls selling vegetables, flowers, cheeses, clothes, pottery and mescal—are so crowded shoppers barely can squeeze through the aisles but "nobody buys anything expensive," the pudgy owner of a chocolate and spice stall told me, "or they just come here to see each other, to chat, to ask about prices, shrug and move on."

For years Mexico's federal government and the Catholic Church have focused the little attention they give the *indigena* population on "Mexicanizing" them. (Over 40 percent of the state's population is of *indigena* descent and nearly one-fourth speak one

of Oaxaca's sixteen indigenous languages.) The nation's federalized school system does not recognize or teach any of these languages and only a few rural Catholic churches offer mass, confession or instruction in any language other than Spanish. Bitter land disputes between neighboring *indigena* communities have killed thousands over the past century; state and federal reaction has been to shrug and "they're only *indios*, let them murder each other."

When the Popular Assembly formed after Ruiz's municipal and state police attempted to crush a city of Oaxaca sit-in it endorsed the *indigena* communal "*usos y costumbres*" ("uses and customs") way of government. Many *indigena* groups joined or supported the Assembly. These groups remained intact after the militarized federal purge but continued to struggle against military forays, Ruiz-controlled state police and *indigena* caciques supported by the state and federal governments.

Dissident radical groups also continued to function. According to a former state official who declined permission to publish his name, Ruiz encouraged the internecine attacks these groups were making on each other and on members and policies of the teachers union. State-paid agents infiltrated them and "Ruiz's smile grew wider every time they publicly denounced each other," the ex-official remembers.

In 2008 Mexico's president Felipe Calderón, faced with soaring inflation, drug cartel takeovers of major cities, a rising unemployment rate and pressure from foreign governments to open Mexico's oil and electricity industries needed the backing of the country's governors to amend Mexico's constitution and allow foreign investment. Government Secretary the late Juan Camilo Mouriño told Ruiz in no uncertain terms that Calderón couldn't afford another "*desmadre*" like the teacher's strike to affect these negotiations. ("*Desmadre*" is a Mexican term for a catastrophe or other destabilizing event.)

Police and paramilitary raids diminished and an apparent calm spread through the state but the once-thriving tourism industry—"factories without chimneys"—never recuperated its pre-repression popularity. Businesses continued to close, Oaxacans to migrate to other cities or the United States, robbery, prostitution and drug sales to increase. The teachers union turned its attention towards national politics as Calderón's

government attempted to federalize union activities, including the union's right to assign teachers to schools. When militarized police violently crushed a teacher-led takeover of highways and other public functions in the state of Morelos, the leader of that movement accused them of "Oaxacanizing" their protest, the word "Oaxacanize" meaning to exert undue and brutal force against a civilian population.

Despite their negative analyses, lawyers-to-be Abraham Cruz and José Octavio flash moments of optimism. The law is a prostitute that's sold itself to authoritarian tyrants but it didn't crush everybody, it didn't crush the thousands of students who participated in the protests, it didn't erase from the memories of the innocent victims of the purges what the authoritarian government had done to them.

"It's true," Cruz asserts, "that we live under a terrible deterioration of values and principles that should sustain society and its institutions. But it's also true that a generation of Oaxacans that organized to put an end to this absolutist and totalitarian police state that tries to crush social protest are vitally alive and are working to create change."

Festive Oaxaca. Festering Oaxaca. As I turn to watch the waitress who's brought me a beer in a noisy bar-eatery a few blocks from the Zócalo sashay towards other customers a round-faced little boy, perhaps five or six years old, appears beside me, a tiny straw basket filled with penny chewing gum in his hand. "Please sir," he pleads, "buy a Chiclets. I haven't sold a single one all day."

He is lying, of course. And of course I buy and because I don't like Chiclets I give them back to him and watch him work the same cute scam at another table.

Oaxaca. The way things are and the things we do to survive.

## Contributor Notes

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**ROBERT JOE STOUT** has written about Mexico for a variety of publications, including *America*, *The American Scholar* and *Notre Dame Magazine*. He was a member of two Rights Action emergency human rights delegations to Oaxaca and witnessed many of the events described. His most recent book is *Running Out the Hurt* published by Black Rose Writing.

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